

Effects of status and outcome on attributions and just-world beliefs: how the social distribution of success and failure may be rationalized

Iatridis, Tilemachos; Fousiani, Kyriaki

Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

www.peerproject.eu

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Iatridis, T., & Fousiani, K. (2009). Effects of status and outcome on attributions and just-world beliefs: how the social distribution of success and failure may be rationalized. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45(2), 415-420.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2008.12.002>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter dem "PEER Licence Agreement zur Verfügung" gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zum PEER-Projekt finden Sie hier: <http://www.peerproject.eu>. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

gesis
Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Terms of use:

This document is made available under the "PEER Licence Agreement". For more information regarding the PEER-project see: <http://www.peerproject.eu>. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

Mitglied der

Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Accepted Manuscript

Effects of status and outcome on attributions and just-world beliefs: How the social distribution of success and failure may be rationalized

Tilemachos Iatridis, Kyriaki Fousiani

PII: S0022-1031(08)00240-0
DOI: [10.1016/j.jesp.2008.12.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2008.12.002)
Reference: YJESP 2192

To appear in: *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*

Received Date: 12 October 2007
Revised Date: 5 December 2008
Accepted Date: 6 December 2008



Please cite this article as: Iatridis, T., Fousiani, K., Effects of status and outcome on attributions and just-world beliefs: How the social distribution of success and failure may be rationalized, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2008), doi: [10.1016/j.jesp.2008.12.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2008.12.002)

This is a PDF file of an unedited manuscript that has been accepted for publication. As a service to our customers we are providing this early version of the manuscript. The manuscript will undergo copyediting, typesetting, and review of the resulting proof before it is published in its final form. Please note that during the production process errors may be discovered which could affect the content, and all legal disclaimers that apply to the journal pertain.

Running head: Status, attributions, and BJW

Effects of status and outcome on attributions and just-world beliefs:
How the social distribution of success and failure may be
rationalized

Tilemachos Iatridis* and Kyriaki Fousiani

Department of Psychology, Panteion University, Greece

* Now with the University of Crete

Correspondence to:

Dr T. Iatridis, Department of Philosophy and Social Studies, University of Crete,

74100 Rethymnon, Greece

(e-mail: iatridis@fks.uoc.gr)

Word-count: 4121

Title

Effects of status and outcome on attributions and just-world beliefs: How the social distribution of success and failure may be rationalized

Abstract

The distribution of success and failure to social groups is supported by lay theories about the characteristics of social groups and the causes of their outcomes, as well as by beliefs about entitlement of groups to succeed or fail. This paper presents a study where a target individual's socio-economic status (high vs. low) and outcome in a major academic achievement task (success vs. failure) were manipulated in a 2 x 2 experimental design. It was found that high-status success and low-status failure, i.e. the system-consistent outcomes, were attributed relatively more to stable internal causes (ability), whereas high-status failure and low-status success, i.e. the system-inconsistent outcomes, were attributed relatively more to unstable causes (effort). Second, participants' belief in a just world was higher in high-status success and low-status failure than in high-status failure and low-status success.

Key words

attributions for success – failure; ability vs. effort; just-world beliefs; system justification; socio-economic status

In societies that place emphasis on individual achievement, individuals' successes and failures define their social or human value and presumably prescribe their positions and status in society (Gardner, 1961). However, lay theories and ideological beliefs about the societal distribution of success and failure are so powerful (e.g. Argyle, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) that a high socio-economic status individual may be judged more favorably than a low status person when performing to the same standard (Darley & Gross, 1983). Lay theories may orient people to explain how outcomes are distributed across social groups by suggesting particular causes for success and failure which in effect reinforce (or question) the existing social arrangements. At the same time, they prescribe how outcomes should be distributed across social groups by suggesting what groups and individuals are entitled to. This paper is concerned with the impact of distributing success and failure to individuals of varied social class membership a) on the social attributions for success and failure made available to lay people, and b) on people's belief in a just world where individuals and social groups presumably get what they deserve. Our approach points out the justificatory and rationalizing role both of shared attributions of the outcomes of social classes and prescriptive ideological beliefs about the social distribution of success and failure.

Attribution to ability vs. effort

Attributions are largely driven by the dominant ideas and ways of making sense circulating in society (Deschamps & Beauvois, 1994; Moscovici, 1984), as illustrated in a number of studies on the perceived causes of poverty and/or wealth (e.g. Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Feagin, 1972; Forgas, Morris, & Furnham, 1982). So far, research has established the justificatory function of attributions for the outcomes of social groups holding asymmetrical positions by pointing to systematic differences in the use of

internal vs. external attributions (e.g. Deaux & Emswiller, 1974; Deschamps & Beauvois, 1994; Hewstone & Jaspars, 1982). What is suggested herein is that lay theories and ideological beliefs may justify the present distribution of social value in a more subtle way by entailing systematic differences in the use of different types of *internal* attributions, i.e. the attributions held to be normative in evaluation contexts in western societies (Beauvois & Dubois, 1988; Jellison & Green, 1981). The internal attribution-types particularly appraised in these contexts are ability and effort (Graham, 1994; Weiner, 1986).

Attribution theory and research suggests that the success expectancies held by individuals affect attributions for their own successes and failures to ability or to effort. According to Weiner's (1986) taxonomy of the causal properties implicated in attributional processes (i.e. locus, controllability, and stability), ability is internal, stable, and uncontrollable, whereas effort is internal, unstable, and controllable. Success has been taken to be preferentially attributed either to effort (e.g. Luginbuhl, Crowe, & Kahan, 1975) or to ability (e.g. Brown & Weiner, 1984) for reasons of perceived controllability. However, it is perceived stability that is mainly thought to affect the social value associated with these attribution types by shaping expectations of future success (e.g. Nicholls, 1975). Attribution theorists emphasize that ability and effort are differentially linked to expectations about the likelihood of future success (Anderson & Weiner, 1992), such that an individual who believes that they have a high probability of succeeding at a task, and an individual who believes that their chances of succeeding are low, would attribute their eventual respective success and failure to stable causes, i.e. to ability. The reverse holds true for unstable causes: experiences of success and experiences of failure would be attributed to effort by individuals with low success expectancy and by those with high success expectancy respectively.

Whereas self-attribution and hetero-attribution are taken to reflect very different concerns (e.g. Hamilton, 1980; Harvey, Harris, & Barnes, 1975; Buss, 1978), the pattern of self-attributions defended by attribution theorists may resemble the use of attributions to ability and effort with which this paper is concerned. People may resort to using either stable or unstable internal causes to account for different-status targets' successes and failures. On the one hand, lay theories suggest that social groups have inherent capacities and traits, leading to essentializing the characteristics of social groups as well as the positions prescribed for them by society (Hochschild, 1995; Hoffman & Hurst, 1990; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997). Attributing system-consistent outcomes (such as high-status groups' successes and low-status groups' failures) to stable internal causes is a powerful way to rationalize the existing distribution of social value, for instance, the academic underachievement of working-class students (Croizet & Claire, 1998). On the other hand, lay theories about the distribution of social value and relations between social groups celebrate the role of diligence and hard work as fundamental to individual mobility. In several contexts, an emphasis on effort might praise individuals even more than an emphasis on inherent ability. However, effort is unstable, and by being attributed to an unstable factor, system-inconsistent outcomes, such as high-status groups' failures and low-status groups' successes, might be explained away as non-permanent irregularities. Thus, system-consistent outcomes, such as high-status groups' success and low-status groups' failure, are likely to be attributed to stable, inherent characteristics and skills, i.e. to ability. By contrast, system-inconsistent outcomes, such as high-status groups' failure and low-status groups' success, are likely to be attributed to unstable internal factors, i.e. to effort.

Beliefs in a just world

Just-world theory (Lerner, 1980) posits that individuals need to believe that good and bad outcomes, as well as rewards and punishments, are not distributed at random. At an early age, people learn that the world is a place where additional investment may entitle them to better outcomes, and subsequently conduct their adult lives accordingly. In a ‘just-world’ order, low-status groups seem doomed to failure, whereas high-status groups are bound to succeed (for a review see Furnham, 2003). This insight into entitlement advances our understanding of the ideological underpinnings of the social distribution of outcomes. In a ‘just-world’, where everyone presumably gets what they deserve, system-consistent outcomes *should* occur. However, in just-world theory, justification of injustice is held to be a consequence of individual belief in a just world (BJW), whereas we would rather place BJW at the ideological level of analysis (Doise, 1986). This perspective may treat BJW as a dependent variable, according to the criteria employed by Brauer and Bourhis (2006) for classifying social dominance orientation (e.g. Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), which is a contextually sensitive construct (Huang & Liu, 2005; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Kappen, 2003) usually treated as an individual-difference factor. System justification (Jost & Banaji, 1994), another construct related to BJW, has also been measured as a dependent variable in studies manipulating exposure to system-relevant information (Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003; McCoy & Major, 2007).

Our question regarding the impact a situation confirming or confuting the existing distribution of social value might have upon BJW does *not* deal with people’s need to believe, but instead addresses only the belief in a just world which “can be influenced by many factors other than the fundamental need to believe in a just world outlined in just-world theory” (Hafer & Bègue, 2005, p. 142). Unlike the need to believe in a just world,

might BJW vary contextually depending on the kind of outcome different social-group members would be faced with?

The direction of the effect that situational variations might have upon BJW is not obvious. Social permeability, as in the case of a low-status individual climbing the social ladder, may increase belief in justice in a system-justifying way (Major & Schmader, 2001; see also Ho, Sanbonmatsu, & Akimoto, 2002). Thus a system-inconsistent outcome such as low-status success should increase BJW. Alternatively, if people use the existing distribution of social value as a rule, as Lerner pointed out (“People tend to imbue social regularities with an ‘ought’ quality.” Lerner, 1980, p. 10), they might adapt their BJW to the context, so that a low-status individual climbing the social ladder would be taken to be a violation of the established distribution of social value. By the same token, a high-status individual meeting failure would probably question BJW on the grounds that the ‘deserving’ should not go unrewarded. This reasoning suggests that system-consistent outcomes would support BJW more than system-inconsistent ones.

These predictions were tested by crossing a target individual’s SES with outcome in an experimental study conducted in Greece drawing upon university students’ perceptions of entrance requirements for admission to postgraduate courses. Participants were presented with a scenario describing a candidate of varied socio-economic background who either managed to or failed to get into a very demanding course. Subsequently, participants were asked to make attributions of the target-student’s outcome, and completed a measure of BJW. As regards attributions, it was expected that a high-status target’s success and a low-status target’s failure (i.e. system-consistent outcomes) would be attributed relatively more to ability; by contrast, a high-status target’s failure and a low-status target’s success (i.e. system-inconsistent outcomes) would be attributed relatively more to effort. As regards

BJW, two alternative predictions were tested: a) that BJW would be comparatively higher when outcomes were system-inconsistent; and b) that BJW would be higher when outcomes were system-consistent, according to our reasoning above.

Method

Participants and experimental design

One hundred and twenty-six university students of both sexes (56 male and 70 female), aged 18-29 ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.1$), from one of three universities in Athens, participated in this study. Participants were randomly assigned to the four experimental conditions, in a 2 (outcome: Success vs. Failure) x 2 (status: High vs. Low) between-participants factorial design.

Procedure

Data were collected in a few sessions in the classroom, each session lasting approximately 30 minutes. Participants were asked to take part voluntarily and fill in a questionnaire about their views on a topic of interest to them with no other information or cover-story being offered.

Participants were presented with a scenario about a fictitious character, Yannis, sitting an entrance exam for an important postgraduate course. Depending on experimental condition, his socio-economic status was either high or low, and further, he either passed or failed the exam. Participants read:

Yannis recently completed his university degree in a subject in which he has always been very interested. He means to continue with his studies and do a postgraduate course.

Yannis' family is very well-off [not well-off] and lives in a large house in Kifisia [a small apartment in Menidi]. As a student he used his own car [the bus] to get to the university campus.

Yannis recently sat some difficult entrance exams for a very prestigious and demanding postgraduate course. He got a score of 9 [8] out of 10 and so he managed [didn't manage] to get into the course.

Manipulation checks followed on the next page: participants were asked (a) whether Yannis has always been keen on the subject he studied, (b) where Yannis' family lives, (c) what means of transport he used to get to the university campus, and (d) whether he managed to get onto the postgraduate course. For each question, participants were asked to choose between two answers, without having recourse to the scenarios.

Next, participants filled in a questionnaire on perceived causes of Yannis' outcome and BJW. Lastly, they were asked about their place of residence and for other demographic data.

Measures

(a) Causal Attribution Scale. This scale, based on Weiner (1986), featured attributions varying in locus, stability, and controllability. In its present form, internal factors included study skills and examination skills (stable – controllable), study effort, preparation for the exam, and concentration on studying (unstable – controllable), ability in the subject and language ability (stable – uncontrollable), mood, exam difficulty, and fear of the exam (unstable – uncontrollable). External factors included family help and help from private tutors (stable – controllable), home conditions (stable – uncontrollable), and luck (unstable – uncontrollable) (as in other work [e.g. Cheung & Rudowicz, 2003], external – unstable – controllable factors were not included). Participants were asked to rate how much

Yannis' outcome was affected by each of these 14 factors on a scale from 1 to 7 (1 = not at all, 7 = greatly). A principal component analysis produced 6 components almost identical in content with the above attribution-types (external – stable attributions, both controllable and uncontrollable, were accounted for by a single component). Internal consistency of subscales after averaging across individual items loading on each component was good (.74 to .81) except for the 'internal – unstable – uncontrollable' subscale (.40) which was excluded from further analysis. Thus, 5 registers of causal attributions were analyzed: internal – stable – controllable ('*skill*'), internal – unstable – controllable ('*effort*'), internal – stable – uncontrollable ('*ability*'), external – stable ('*support*'), and external – unstable – uncontrollable ('*luck*').

In addition to the above items, one question addressed attributions to ability vs. effort on a bipolar scale (1 = ability, 7 = effort), forcing participants to choose between them:

In your opinion, was Yannis' performance due to his ability, or to how hard he tried before the exams? ['ability vs. effort'].

(b) *Causal Dimension Scale*. The *Revised Causal Dimension Scale (CDSII*; McAuley, Duncan, & Russell, 1992) was used as a measure of the causal dimensions underlying participants' attributions. Like most work in the field, this scale measures attributions to self rather than to others, therefore personal pronouns were changed where appropriate. Participants were presented with 12 bipolar 7-point scales anchored in their extremes by opposing possible causes of Yannis' outcome. These bipolar scales measured locus of causality (e.g. *Is the cause of Yannis performance something*: 'inside of him' [= 1] vs. 'outside of him' [= 7]), stability (e.g. *Is the cause...* 'permanent' [= 1] vs. 'temporary' [= 7]), personal control (e.g. *Is the cause...* 'manageable by him' [= 1] vs. 'not manageable

by him' [= 7]) and external control (e.g. *Is the cause...* 'under the power of other people' [= 1] vs. 'not under the power of other people' [= 7]). To make results easier to read, scores were reversed such that the higher a score, the more internal, stable, and personally controlled an outcome was perceived. Internal consistency of the four subscales after averaging across respective items was high, ranging from .79 to .85.

(c) *Belief in a just world*. Participants were administered the 20-item Rubin and Peplau (1975) scale, previously used on another sample of Greek students (Papastamou & Prodromitis, 2003). In this scale, 11 items measure belief in a just world (e.g. "People who get 'lucky breaks' have usually earned their good fortune"), and the remaining 9 items measure belief in an unjust world (e.g. "I've found that a person rarely deserves the reputation he or she has"). We present results on a single index of BJW ($\alpha = .73$) after appropriate reverse-scoring and averaging across items.

Results

Seven of the 126 participants, evenly distributed across experimental conditions ($\chi^2(1) = .06, ns$), failed the manipulation checks and their data were excluded from further analysis.

Causal Attribution Scale

A 2 (outcome) x 2 (status) x 5 (attribution-type) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor produced a significant main effect of the within-participant factor, $F(4, 456) = 22.64, p < .001$, suggesting differential treatment of attribution-types. Effort was rated higher than all other attributions ($M = 5.66, SD = 1.10$), followed by ability ($M = 5.27, SD = 1.35$) and skill ($M = 5.19, SD = 1.45$), and, finally, by both registers of external attributions ($M = 4.52, SD = 1.39$ for support; $M = 4.36, SD = 1.70$ for luck). Attribution-type interacted significantly with outcome, $F(4, 456) = 3.79, p < .005$, suggesting a positivity bias in all

internal attributions: more than failure, success was attributed to effort ($M_{succ.} = 5.96, SD = .91$ vs. $M_{fail.} = 5.34, SD = 1.20$), to ability ($M_{succ.} = 5.52, SD = 1.33$ vs. $M_{fail.} = 5.02, SD = 1.33$), and to skill ($M_{succ.} = 5.67, SD = 1.29$ vs. $M_{fail.} = 4.69, SD = 1.45$) (all $ps < .05$).

The interaction of attribution-type, outcome, and status was also significant, $F(4, 456) = 18.40, p < .001$. Two-way ANOVA's on each attribution-type produced significant interactions on two attribution-types: ability and luck. As may be seen in Table 1, ability was rated comparatively higher in high-status success and in low-status failure than in high-status failure and low-status success. On the other hand, high-status failure and, particularly, low-status success were attributed to luck more than high-status success and low-status failure (see also, for instance, Deaux & Emswiller, 1974; Frieze & Weiner, 1971).

-----Table 1 about here-----

The two-way interaction for effort was not significant (see Table 1). However, in within-participant comparisons between effort and ability, ability was rated higher than effort in the low-status failure condition, $t(30) = 2.64, p < .02$, and, though not significantly, in the high-status success condition, $t(28) = 1.39, ns$. The pattern of attributions to ability and effort was further clarified by a 2-way ANOVA on the bipolar 'ability vs. effort' scale, which produced another significant interaction, $F(1, 115) = 27.85, p < .001$. High-status failure and low-status success were clearly attributed to effort far more than were both high-status success and low-status failure (see Figure 1).

-----Figure 1 about here-----

Causal Dimension Scale

A 2 (outcome) x 2 (status) x 4 (causal dimension) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor produced a significant interaction of causal dimension and outcome, $F(3, 345) = 9.23, p < .001$. Compared to failure, success was considered more internal ($M_{succ.} =$

3.19, $SD = 1.31$ vs. $M_{fail.} = 3.87$, $SD = 1.43$), more stable ($M_{succ.} = 3.93$, $SD = 1.41$ vs. $M_{fail.} = 4.74$, $SD = 1.67$), more a matter of personal control ($M_{succ.} = 3.06$, $SD = 1.32$ vs. $M_{fail.} = 3.90$, $SD = 1.42$), but less a matter of external control ($M_{succ.} = 4.41$, $SD = 1.24$ vs. $M_{fail.} = 3.80$, $SD = 1.43$) (all $ps < .05$).

The 3-way interaction was also significant, $F(3, 345) = 20.71$, $p < .001$. Two-way ANOVA's on each dimension revealed significant interactions of status and outcome on locus and stability, but none on controllability (see Table 2). First, system-consistent outcomes were considered more internal than the system-inconsistent ones: high-status success was attributed to internal causes more than high-status failure or low-status success, and low-status failure was attributed to internal causes more than high-status failure. Second, high-status success and low-status failure were attributed to stable causes significantly more than high-status failure and low-status success.

-----Table 2 about here-----

Belief in a just world

The two-way ANOVA produced a significant interaction, $F(1, 115) = 5.08$, $p < .03$, with BJW relatively higher in high-status success and in low-status failure (see Figure 2). Both high-status success and low-status failure differed reliably from low-status success, but did not differ reliably from high-status failure.

-----Figure 2 about here-----

Discussion

One way in which lay theories and beliefs explain the distribution of outcomes to social groups might be the systematic variation in the attribution of success and failure to ability and effort. Participants in this study generally endorsed effort more than ability as a causal attribution, probably reflecting the emphasis laid on effort within the present type of

societal organization, where diligence is worshiped as the cornerstone of individual mobility, and where common assumptions such as ‘hard work pays dividends’ form an achievement cult (Ehrenberg, 1991). However, the preference for effort over ability clearly applies to system-inconsistent outcomes (high-status failure and low-status success). When outcomes were in line with the status quo (high-status success and low-status failure), attributions to ability were endorsed even more than effort. Hence, not only may the system-consistent outcomes be attributed to ability more than the system-inconsistent ones in relative terms, but they may also be attributed to ability more than to effort, just as the system-inconsistent outcomes may be attributed to effort more than to ability. As shown with the aid of the Causal Dimension Scale, these systematic differences reflect differences in perceived stability (and, tellingly, in perceived locus) of respective outcomes. In this sense, the attribution of system-consistent outcomes to ability reflects the emphasis society places on stable internal factors such as personality traits in a great number of evaluation-relevant contexts, which range from organizational practices to psychological theories of individual differences (Beauvois & Le Poutier, 1986). These findings add to the literature on the justificatory function of stable and unstable attributions. Attributing system-consistent outcomes to inherent capacities of groups and individuals essentially favors the existing distribution of social value (e.g. Hochschild, 1995; Hoffman & Hurst, 1990; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997), whereas attributing the system-inconsistent outcomes to unstable internal causes explains away these outcomes as non-permanent irregularities. These findings may also extend the literature on attributions for expected and unexpected outcomes. It is possible that social accounts of the outcomes of social classes become internalized and affect individual expectancies, thereby resulting in the self-perpetuating cycle identified by attribution theorists (Anderson & Weiner, 1992; Weiner, 1986): making

stable attributions for expected outcomes (in the cases of high-status and low-status individuals holding high and low success-expectancies respectively) and making unstable attributions for unexpected outcomes (in the cases of low-status and high-status individuals holding high and low success-expectancies respectively).

Lay theories also prescribe the distribution of outcomes in society by suggesting the degree to which social groups are entitled to achievement. The present paper makes a case for the possible impact of the social distribution of outcomes upon individuals' beliefs about entitlement and 'deservingness', and gives evidence that the world may be thought of as a just place in the face of system-consistent outcomes more than in the event of system-inconsistent ones. These results have implications for the perpetuation of power-relations in general, as well as for the consequences of exposure to system-inconsistent outcomes in particular. Research on system-justification has shown that a challenge to the social system often results in increased motivation to justify the system (for a review see Jost & Hunyady, 2002). Thus, exposure to a situation in which a low-status individual succeeds should increase belief in justice, particularly so if success is linked to some compensatory characteristic. As a strand of studies on the effect of complementary stereotypes upon system justification suggests (see Kay, Jost, Mandisodza, Sherman, Petrocelli, & Johnson, 2007), people would justify the system mostly after exposure to situations in which low-status targets are presented as possessing compensatory characteristics (e.g. honesty, friendliness, etc.). Although it is unclear whether we might posit effort as another compensatory characteristic of low-status groups, if that was the case, belief in justice should increase even more. Yet the present pattern of results suggests otherwise. An individual who 'makes his way up' is probably considered to be violating the order that corresponds to the established distribution of social value, suggesting that social regularities

indeed become prescriptive (Lerner, 1980). This insight makes a contribution to the understanding of the cognitive (rather than motivational) aspects in BJW which, according to Jost and Hunyady (2002), are closer to the concept of dominant ideology. ‘Cognitive’ aspects do not imply some information processing directed at representing reality; we assume that ideological elements such as BJW (as well as shared attributions of the outcomes of social classes) rationalize the social distribution of values rather than merely reflect the existing distribution of outcomes to social groups (Hoffman & Hurst, 1990; Jost & Banaji, 1994).

Nevertheless, our results may question the ideological assumptions about the value of diligence which are intrinsic to BJW. A common way to see deservedness, which is what BJW is all about, is that people have most probably done something to earn their place in society. Thus high SES groups might be expected to have achieved great things to deserve such status, as opposed to the underachievements of lower SES groups. However, our results regarding inferred ability and effort would further suggest that this assumption does not generally hold, meaning that people would demand that only low SES group-members should ‘earn’ a place in society.

Finally, two additional caveats are warranted. First, the current study was conducted in Greece, which has experienced remarkable social mobility since the end of World War II, and values individual achievement, competence, and other features of a market economy and liberalism. Yet even in contexts with cultural similarities, such as the United States and Australia, exposure to the same system-relevant information may produce differential consequences (Mandisodza, Jost, & Unzueta, 2006; see also Feather, 1998). Secondly, like most studies, our research operationalized social class as socio-economic status, although the two concepts are not semantically identical. SES indicators capture economic and other

resources, whereas 'class' implies some sort of social relation "characterized by discrimination, [...] power, and/or exploitation." (Ostrove & Cole, 2005, p. 682). This relational aspect might only have been implicit in our research - had it been more salient, the results would probably have expressed stronger motivational concerns than suggested here.

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Bernard Weiner for his kind suggestions and help with attribution measures, and Jamin Halberstadt for his comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

References

- Anderson, C. A., & Weiner, B. (1992). Attribution and attributional processes in personality. In G. Caprara & G. Heck (Eds.), *Modern personality psychology: Critical reviews and new directions* (pp. 295-324). New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Argyle, M. (1994). *The psychology of social class*. London: Routledge.
- Beauvois, J. L., & Dubois, N. (1988). The norm of internality in the explanation of psychological events. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 54, 51-61.
- Beauvois, J. L., & Le Poutier, F. (1986). Norme d'internalité et pouvoir social en psychologie quotidienne. *Psychologie Française*, 31, 100-108.
- Brauer, M., & Bourhis, R. Y. (2006). Social power. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 36, 601-616.
- Brown J., & Weiner B. (1984). Affective consequences of ability versus effort ascriptions controversies, resolutions, and quandaries. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76, 146-158.
- Buss, A. (1978). Causes and reasons in attribution theory: A conceptual critique. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36, 1311-1321.
- Cheung, C.-K., & Rudowicz, E. (2003). Underachievement and attributions among students attending schools stratified by student ability. *Social Psychology of Education*, 6, 303-323.
- Cozzarelli, C., Wilkinson, A. V., & Tagler, M. J. (2001). Attitudes toward the poor and attributions for poverty. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57, 207-227.

- Croizet, J.-C., & Claire, T. (1998). Extending the concept of stereotype and threat to social class: The intellectual underperformance of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 24, 588-594.
- Darley, J. M., & Gross, P. H. (1983). A hypothesis-confirming bias in labelling effects. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44, 20-33.
- Deaux, K., & Emswiller, T. (1974). Explanation of successful performance on sex-linked task: What is skill for male is luck for the female. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 29, 80-85.
- Deschamps, J.-C., & Beauvois, J.-L. (1994). Attributions intergroupes. In R. Y. Bouhris & J.-P. Leyens (Eds.), *Stéréotypes, discrimination et relations intergroupes*. Liège: Mardaga.
- Doise, W. (1986). *Levels of explanation in social psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ehrenberg, A. (1991). *Le culte de la performance*. Paris: Calmann-Levy.
- Feagin, J. R. (1972). Poverty: We still believe that God helps them who help themselves. *Psychology Today*, 6, 101-129.
- Feather, N. T. (1998). Attitudes towards high achievers, self-esteem, and value priorities for Australian, American, and Canadian students. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 29, 749-759.
- Forgas, J. P., Morris, S. L., & Furnham, A. (1982). Lay explanations of wealth: Attributions for economic success. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 12, 381-397.
- Frieze, I. H., & Weiner, B. (1971). Cue utilization and attributional judgements for success and failure. *Journal of Personality*, 39, 591-605.

- Furnham, A. (2003). Belief in a just world: Research progress over the past decade. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 34, 795-817.
- Gardner, J. (1961). *Excellence: Can we be excellent and equal too?* New York: Harper-Row.
- Graham, S. (1994). Classroom motivation from an attributional perspective. In H. F. O'Neil, Jr. & M. Drillings (Eds.), *Motivation theory and research*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Hafer, C. L., & Bègue, L. (2005). Experimental research on just-world theory: Problems, developments, and future challenges. *Psychological Bulletin*, 131, 128-167.
- Hamilton, V. L. (1980). Intuitive psychologist or intuitive lawyer? Alternative models of the attribution process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39, 767-772.
- Harvey, J. H., Harris, B., & Barnes, R. D. (1975). Actor–observer differences in the perception of responsibility and freedom. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 32, 22-28.
- Hewstone, M., & Jaspars, J. (1982). Intergroup relations and attribution processes. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Social identity and intergroup relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ho, E. A., Sanbonmatsu, D. M., & Akimoto, S. A. (2002). The effects of comparative status on social stereotypes: How the perceived success of some persons affects the stereotypes of others. *Social Cognition*, 20, 36-57.
- Hochschild, J. L. (1995). *Facing up to the American dream*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press
- Hoffman, C., & Hurst, N. (1990). Gender stereotypes: Perception or rationalization? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58, 197-208.

- Huang, L., & Liu, J. H. (2005). Personality and social structural implications of the situational priming of social dominance orientation. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 38, 267-276.
- Jellison, J. M., & Green, J. (1981). A self-presentation approach to the fundamental attribution error: The norm of internality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 40, 643-649.
- Jost, J. T., & Banaji, M. R. (1994). The role of stereotyping in system justification and the production of false consciousness. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 33, 1-27.
- Jost, J. T., & Hunyady, O. (2002). The psychology of system justification and the palliative function of ideology. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 13, 111-153.
- Jost, J. T., & Kay, A. C. (2005). Exposure to benevolent sexism and complementary gender stereotypes: Consequences for specific and diffuse forms of system justification. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88, 498-509.
- Kay, A. C., & Jost, J. T. (2003). Complementary justice: Effects of “poor but happy” and “poor but honest” stereotype exemplars on system justification and implicit activation of the justice motive. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 823-837.
- Kay, A. C., Jost, J. T., Mandisodza, A. N., Sherman, S. J., Petrocelli, J. V., & Johnson, A. L. (2007). Panglossian ideology in the service of system justification: How complementary stereotypes help us to rationalize inequality. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 39, 305-358.
- Lerner, M. J. (1980). *The Belief in a Just World: A fundamental delusion*. New York: Plenum.

- Luginbuhl, J. E. R., Crowe, D. H., & Kahan, J. P. (1975). Causal attribution for success and failure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 31, 86-93.
- Major, B., & Schmader, T. (2001). Legitimacy and the construal of social disadvantage. In J. T. Jost & B. Major (Eds.), *The psychology of legitimacy* (pp. 176-204). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mandisodza, A. N., Jost, J. T., & Unzueta, M. M. (2006). "Tall Poppies" and "American Dreams": Reactions to rich and poor in Australia and the United States. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 37, 659-668.
- McAuley, E., Duncan, T. E., & Russell, D. W. (1992). Measuring causal attributions: The Revised Causal Dimension Scale (SDSII). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 18, 566-573.
- McCoy, S. K., & Major, B. (2007). Priming meritocracy and the psychological justification of inequality. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 43, 341-351.
- Moscovici, S. (1984). The phenomenon of social representations. In R. M. Farr & S. Moscovici (Eds.), *Social Representations* (pp. 3-69). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nicholls, J. G. (1975). Causal attribution and other achievement related cognitions: Effects of task outcome, attainment, value and sex. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 31, 379-389.
- Papastamou, S., & Prodromitis, G. (2003). *Tromokratia kai exousia* [Terrorism and power.] Athens: Ellinika Grammata.
- Rubin, Z., & Peplau, L. (1975). Who believes in a just world? *Journal of Social Issues*, 31, 65-89.

- Schmitt, M. T., Branscombe, N. R., & Kappen, D. M. (2003). Attitudes towards group-based inequality: Social dominance or social identity? *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 42, 161-186.
- Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (1999). *Social dominance: An intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weiner, B. (1979). A theory of motivation for some classroom experiences. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 71, 3-25.
- Weiner, B. (1986). *An attributional theory of motivation and emotion*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Yzerbyt, V., Rocher, S., & Schadron, G. (1997). Stereotypes as explanations: A subjective essentialistic view of group perception. In R. Spears, P. J. Oakes, N. Ellemers, & S.A. Haslam (Eds.), *The social psychology of stereotyping and group life* (pp. 20-50). Cambridge: Blackwell.

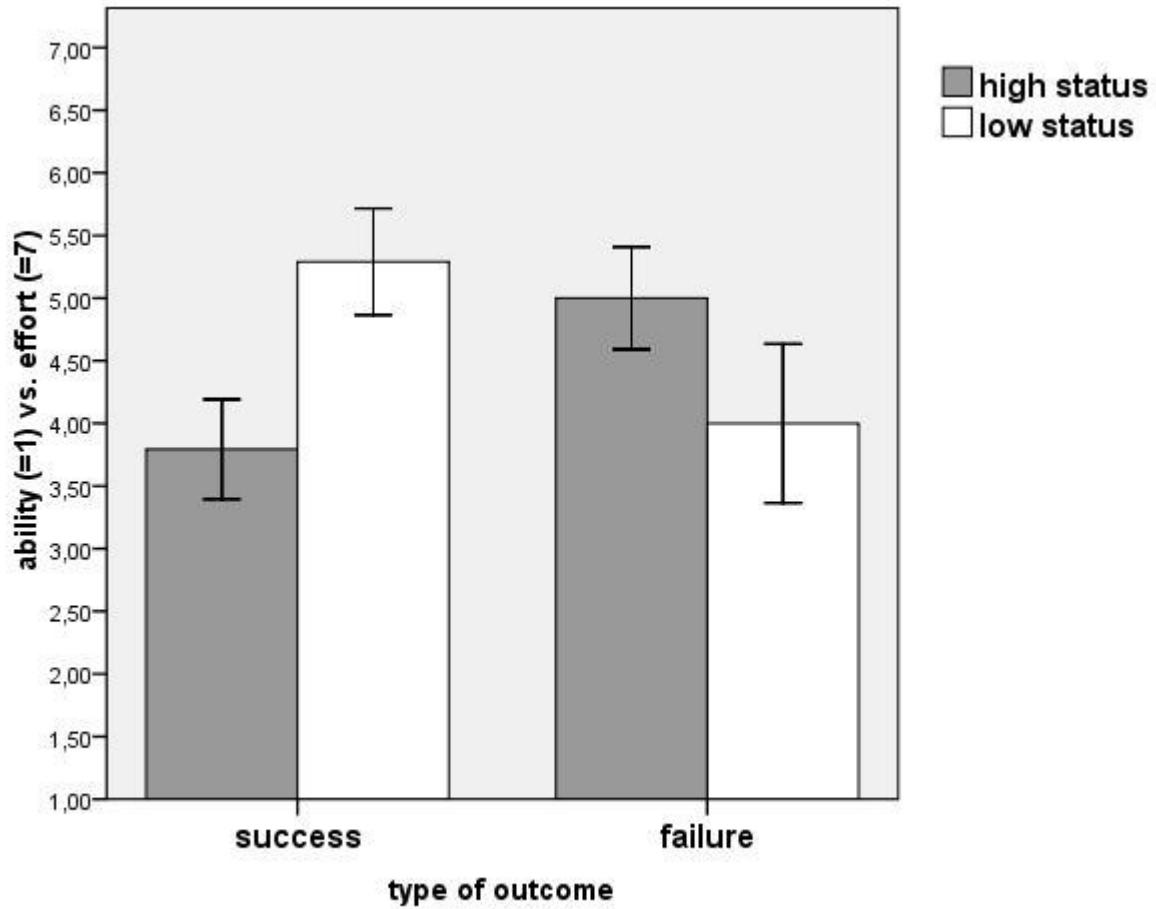


Figure 1. Attributions to ability vs. effort by levels of target's status and type of outcome.

Note. 1 = ability, 7 = effort. Error-bars represent confidence intervals of 95%.

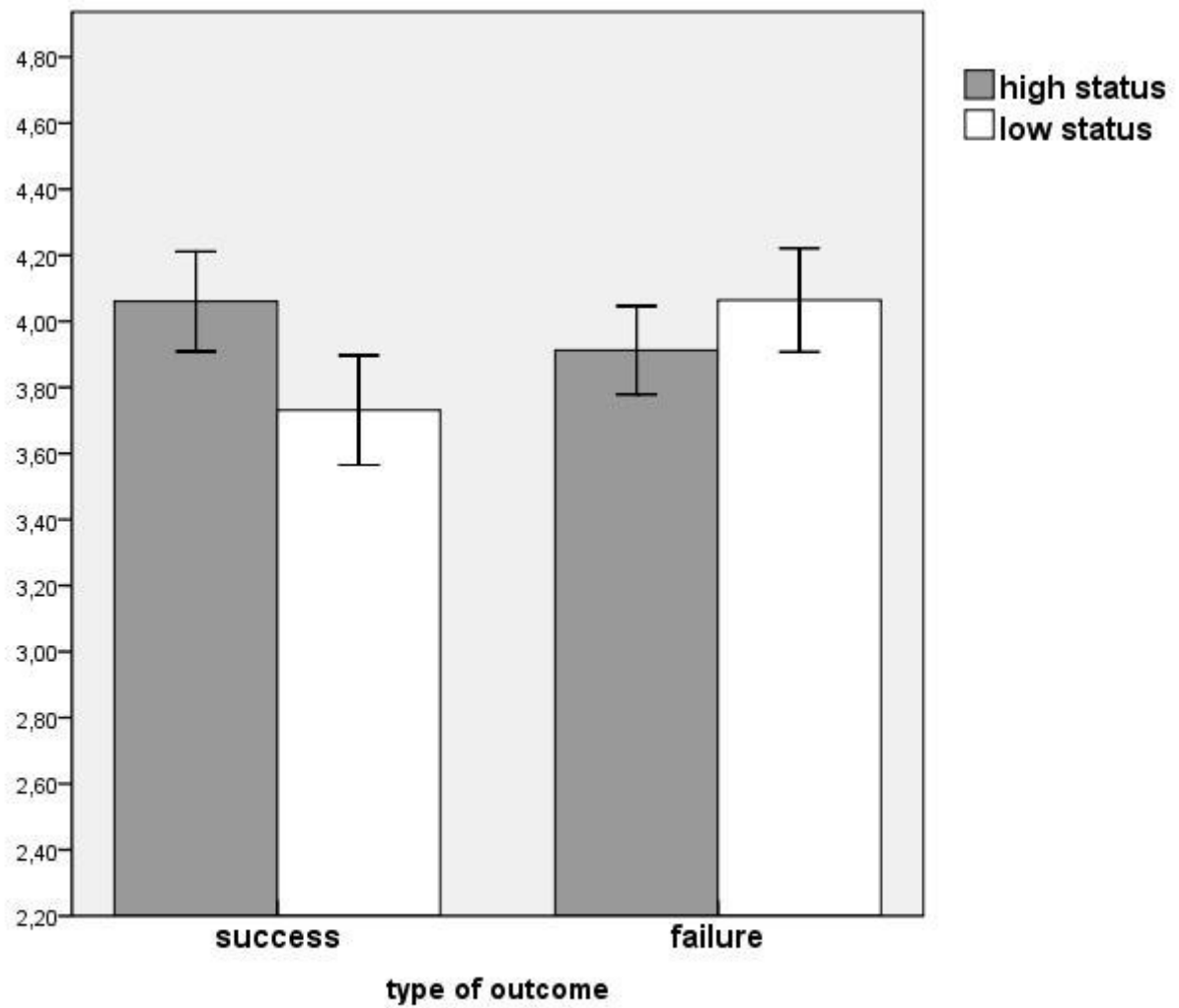


Figure 2. Participants' Belief in a Just World by levels of target's status and outcome.

Note. Scale is 7-point. The higher a mean, the higher BJW. Error-bars represent confidence intervals of 95%.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations (in italics) for 5 attribution-types across experimental conditions.

	High status		Low status		<i>status x outcome</i>
	Success	Failure	Success	Failure	<i>F(1, 115)</i>
internal-unstable-	5.81	5.48	6.11	5.21	2.24
controllable (<i>effort</i>)	.81	1.21	.98	1.18	
internal-stable-	6.09 _a	4.18 _b	5.00 _b	5.74 _a	38.37*
uncontrollable (<i>ability</i>)	.98	1.38	1.41	.73	
internal-stable-controllable	5.40	4.43	5.94	4.90	.04
(<i>skill</i>)	1.24	1.42	1.30	1.48	
external-stable (<i>support</i>)	4.61	4.75	4.40	4.46	.01
	1.16	1.54	1.25	1.55	
external-unstable-	3.52 _a	4.70 _{bc}	5.39 _b	3.90 _{ac}	20.34*
uncontrollable (<i>luck</i>)	1.64	1.88	1.23	1.40	

Note. * $p < .001$. All scales are 7-point. In the same row, means that do not share a common subscript differ at $p < .05$ (Bonferroni-test).

Table 2. Means and standard deviations (in italics) for perceived causal dimensions across experimental conditions.

	High status		Low status		<i>status x outcome</i>
	Success	Failure	Success	Failure	<i>F(1, 115)</i>
Locus	5.28 _a	3.64 _b	4.37 _{bc}	4.56 _{ac}	14.62*
	<i>1.14</i>	<i>1.53</i>	<i>1.32</i>	<i>1.19</i>	
Stability	5.00 _a	2.05 _b	3.19 _b	4.34 _a	94.00*
	<i>1.33</i>	<i>.81</i>	<i>.78</i>	<i>1.49</i>	
Personal control	5.00	4.42	4.88	3.82	.92
	<i>1.33</i>	<i>1.42</i>	<i>1.33</i>	<i>1.39</i>	
External control	3.42	4.23	3.74	4.18	.55
	<i>1.40</i>	<i>1.59</i>	<i>1.06</i>	<i>1.31</i>	

Note. * $p < .001$. All scales are 7-point. The higher the mean, the more internal, stable, a matter of personal control, or a matter of external control, a cause respectively. In the same row, means that do not share a common subscript differ at $p < .05$ (Bonferroni-test).